DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 201 385 PS 012 125

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TITLE Kindergarten Teachers and Curriculum Construct Systems.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (April 11-17, 1981, Los Angeles, CA).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Concept Formation; *Curriculum; Foreign Countries; *Kindergarten; *Preschool Teachers; Primary Education; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; *Curriculum Construct Systems; Curriculum Implementation

ABSTRACT

This paper reports case study investigations of themes in three kindergarten teachers' curriculum construct systems. Curriculum, in this instance, is viewed as involving people, space, time, and things that become endowed with meaning as a classroom culture is established. Three classrooms in one school district, each constituting a separate case, were visited three times for a total of seven and one-half hours per classroom. Observation, non-standardized interviews and document analyses were used to illuminate how the teachers typified what happened in their classrooms. In each case study, themes were selected from the data that portrayed the characteristic emphases in the curriculum construct system held by each teacher. Similarities as well as differences among the teachers were found. Thematic differences, which were related to the implementation of curriculum, ranged from concern with predictability/flexibility and variety/integration to concern with continuity/variety in the context of multiple purposes and multiple outcomes. Similarities across classrooms appeared to be related to the contents of the school district's kindergarten curriculum guide, but similiarities had different meanings for each teacher. Underlying the similarities in the way teachers planned for learning, there were four areas in which differences were evident: reasons for complexity, concepts of appropriate teaching activity, meanings of "work" and "play," and themes included in and excluded from the teachers' curriculum construct systems. (Author/RH)

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KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND CURRICULUM CONSTRUCT SYSTEMS

Paper prepared for the 1981 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association: Los Angeles, California; April 11-17, 1981.

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT: NOT FOR REPRINT.

ABSTRACT

Case studies were undertaken to seek an understanding of the constellation of meanings that three kindergarten teachers used to define the curriculum activity that took place in their classrooms. The sets of meanings about appropriate curriculum activity, about children as learners, and about learning priorities comprise each teacher's curriculum construct system. (Halliwell, 1980)

The data base for each case study came from observing in classrooms, noting recurring patterns of activity that appeared to be important in individual classrooms, and then discussing these emphases with the teacher during non-standardized interviews after school. The interview data indicated the unifying curriculum themes that each teacher used to make sense of the planned activity in their classroom. Analysis of the data from interviews also indicated that the teachers used the theories they held about children as learners, and, to a lesser extent their learning priorities, to identify appropriate curriculum activity.

The three case studies revealed the extent to which these kindergarten teachers differed from one another as well as revealing similarities in their approach to curriculum. Four aspects of the cases were chosen, to discuss features of the curriculum construct systems that would be of interest to curriculum workers and early childhood educators:

1. The three kindergarten teachers characterized children as learners with individual interests, individual growth patterns, and individual learning styles. They defined appropriate curriculum activity in terms of these beliefs so that variety and complexity were seen to be desirable features of the materials, interactions and daily schedules they planned. A good activity was considered to be one that had multiple purposes and provided for multiple outcomes.

2. The extent to which the teachers used didactic versus inductive teaching techniques varied considerably, and appeared to be loosely related to learning priorities. Discussion about teaching techniques was a sensitive area to explore with the teachers.

3. There were distinct differences in the meanings and the activities that each teacher attached to the terms 'work' and 'play'.

4. Although the early childhood teacher's approach to curriculum is traditionally associated with the promotion of 'freedom', 'creativity', and 'play', these were not terms used by any of the three kindergarten teachers to explain and/or justify their curriculum activity.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the application of case study methodology to answering questions about the meanings that participants give to their educational experiences. Case study methodology emphasizes an interest in human culture, in practical educational situations, in empathetic understanding, and in developing ways to establish reciprocal communication among communities of educators (Schubert, 1980: Stake, 1978).

It is argued that the use of this methodology provides an efficient and effective technique for finding answers to questions about what educational experiences mean to those involved. These are important questions to be answered for those interested in understanding the educational enterprise as it is presently practiced. Other techniques are used for answering questions related to whether practice ought to be changed, and how it might be changed.

Purpose of the Study

This study was undertaken in order to contribute to dialogue about what happens in classrooms, by sharing with the reader the curriculum themes that three kindergarten teachers use to give meaning to what they do in classrooms. It is a study in the tradition of *Life in Classrooms* (Jackson, 1968) for it does not aim to praise, criticize, or change the kindergarten teacher's approach to curriculum. The goal is specifically that of providing a basis for discussion, for dialogue between researchers, curriculum workers, and teachers who are interested

in early childhood curriculum. With this purpose in mind, three individual case studies were undertaken, and a later analysis was made to highlight aspects of the cases that would be of interest to others seeking to understand kindergarten classrooms.

Although there have been many attempts to change early childhood curriculum since the middle of the nineteen-sixties, this activity reflecting the wide range of theories about early childhood curriculum that have been promoted during that time, there is remarkably little known about what actually happens in an ordinary kindergarten or pre-school classroom.

Even less is known about the meanings that the early childhood teacher employs to make sense of what she plans and does in the classroom. Yet it may be that in seeking to change that which we do not understand we are engaged in futile, or possibly even detrimental activity. As Jackson (1968) has put it:

> As we learn more about what goes on in these densely populated hives of educational activity it may turn out that we will seek to preserve, rather than to transform, whatever amount of artistry is contained in the teacher's work.
>
> (p. 175)

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Three teachers were studied using observation during kindergarten sessions, non-standardized interviews, and an analysis of the documents used by the teachers, such as child observation check-lists and the school district curriculum guide. These techniques were used to seek to understand curriculum activity as the teachers understood it.

Drawing on Stake's notion of "procedures for portraying the whole cloth of an instructional program" (Stake, 1972), the findings were presented in two forms. First, individual case studies were presented to provide the reader with a portrayal of the curriculum construct systems each teacher used to explain their classroom practice, then aspects of each case were raised again in a discussion about the cases. Presentation of the findings in these forms was designed to give the reader the necessary information to achieve some understanding of the curriculum construct systems used by these teachers and to contribute to dialogue about early childhood curriculum on the basis of shared understandings.

Choosing the Teachers

Three kindergarten teachers who were considered to be competent and experienced by those familiar with their work, were studied. Such teachers were considered to be likely to be able to articulate relationships between practice and intent, and to avoid those unintended organizational errors that might cloud the intended patterns with which this study was concerned.

Gathering the Data

Each classroom was visited for three observation sessions, each of two and one-half hours duration. During the visits the observer was free to interact with the children, to sit and take notes, or to assist the teacher when she indicated that she wanted help. As the children in all the participating classrooms were used to visitors, my presence in the room was initially noted and then I was treated as just another visitor, benign but uninteresting, yet useful if a child wanted something such as a staple in some paper.

A tape-recorder was used on the second and third visit, to record characteristic interchanges between teacher and children during group times. The use of the tape-recorder was not suitable during one-to-one interchanges as it seemed obtrusive in such situations. Recordings, rather than transcripts of them, were used when processing the data, as the tape-recordings helped recapture the quality of each teacher's style of interacting with children.

On the first day running records were made of classroom activity, then these records were examined to look for significant patterns related to teacher intent. On the second visit further notes were made of those patterns already noted, as well as of any new, potentially relevant emphases. Tape recordings were made of verbal interaction during group times. The third observation period was made after interviewing the teacher and the understandings of both the teacher and the observer were compared in terms of what was happening.

The interview material provided considerable insight into what the teacher intended by her actions. Occasionally there were differences between the interpretations of the observer and the intentions of the teacher and these were discussed at length. Any continuing divergent views about classroom activity were noted in the case studies.

The first interview was held immediately after the second observation, in the classroom, and it was taped. This allowed the researcher to attempt a more conversational style than if notes were taken. A few questions (see Appendix 1) were prepared so it could be ensured that all relevant topics were covered. One of these questions, but not a particular one, was used to start the interview. Once the teacher began to talk about curriculum in her own terms, the questions were not referred to unless needed to steer the direction of the conversation. The second interview took place after the case study was prepared in draft form. The purpose was to discuss and if necessary adjust the emphases and interpretations made in the case study, and to find out which parts of the portrayal the teacher identified with.

In looking for the curricular meanings that teachers attributed to their classroom activity, it was conjectured that three observations of a session in action would enable the researcher to note recurring patterns of intentional behavior and the first interview would provide an opportunity to discuss these with the teacher. The written case study would provide another opportunity for the teacher and the researcher to discuss the interpretations and emphases that were made. In practice,

it seemed that this period of time for data collection did produce information that was useful to the inquiry. A major problem for the researcher, however, was the short time allowed for making sense of a seemingly overwhelming amount of data. More time for analysis between each case would have helped.

Boundaries and Issues

In order to explore the meanings that teachers give to curriculum activity a broad perspective on what 'curriculum' might encompass was required. Bussis, Chittenden, and Amarel (1976) argue that 'curriculum' as teachers encounter it, involves people, space, time, and things that become endowed with meanings as a classroom culture is established.

> Most people interpret curriculum as meaning 'logical organization of subject matter'. It seems obvious, however, that neither teachers nor children encounter this conception of curriculum in the classroom. What they do encounter is each other, materials, activity, and a particular physical setting (i.e. an arrangement of equipment and furniture). All of these, plus the school at large and the outside environment, represent potential resources at the teacher's disposal. How and whether a person perceives these as instructional resources, and what learnings they are perceived to promote, determine the nature of an individual's 'curriculum construct system'.
>
> (p 49)

This conception of curriculum provided a boundary for the case studies. Any intentional activity of the teacher's in these areas was considered relevant to the inquiry.

Each classroom constituted a separate case. The case was concerned with how the teacher typified what happened in the classroom. Despite the difficulties and potential pitfalls in looking for the structure of the case from within, the advantages seemed to outweigh the disadvantages for this study. Indeed, a search for 'emic' issues (Stake, 1978) seemed mandatory in a study that focussed on the curriculum construct systems of the teacher, not the observer. Emic issues were defined as those that were deemed important by the participants in the culture being studied, and they were discovered as the researcher learned about the culture from the participant's perspective. Emic issues included emphases made by participants, the categories of meaning they employed and the things they defined as problematic.

As it was recognized that the researcher's own knowledge of early childhood curriculum practice would influence her perceptions of what was relevant within the kaleidoscope of events in a classroom, four foreshadowing issues were chosen to help predispose the researcher to look for teacher meanings:

1. What recurring patterns in this classroom are related to curriculum intent?
2. Does the teacher confine intent to lesson times or does it extend to other aspects of the classroom environment?
3. Which recurring patterns appear to be emphasized by the teacher?
4. How does the teacher explain these emphases?

Triangulation

Verification of the interpretation of events made by the researcher, using case study methods, involves attempts to observe the case from multiple perspectives. In this study, the three observations of the classroom in action, each from a slightly different perspective, aimed to verify the interpretations made of patterns of activity in each classroom. The taped interaction and interviews were played numerous times to check details of the recurring patterns selected for study, as the draft case studies were prepared. The presentation of the draft case study to the teacher for perusal and comment was considered an important strategy for checking the accuracy of the portrayals.

Portrayals

Each case study was written with the objective in mind that it was to convey to the target audience of researchers, curriculum workers and early childhood teachers something of the quality of how each teacher conceptualized appropriate curriculum activity in her classroom. An attempt was made to capture the uniqueness of each case, and the themes that gave coherence to each teacher's construct system.

Discussion

As each case had its own structure, similarities and differences between the cases were not raised there. In the discussion that followed presentation of the cases, those similarities and differences that became of interest to the researcher during the course of the study were extracted for further comment. The intention in the discussion section was to raise some of the teacher understandings for perusal in such a way that the discussion contributed to ongoing dialogue about kindergarten curriculum, among curriculum workers, researchers, and teachers.

Limitations

The study does attempt to contribute to hermeneutic inquiry, to the shared understandings of communities of educators. It attempts to provide details of the uniqueness of particular cases and to share the observer's understanding of the curriculum constructs of teachers. It does not attempt to show causal relationships between teacher understandings and other variables such as ideological commitment or school contexts.

It should be noted that the three teachers selected for this study were not intended to be a sample from which generalizations could be made to the population of kindergarten teachers in the United States. The reader, though, is encouraged to compare and contrast the curriculum construct systems of these teachers, as they are illuminated in each separate case, with his own knowledge of early childhood curriculum.

FINDINGS

The three case studies portrayed three distinctively different people, with different personalities, different amounts of teaching experience, different world views, different professional training backgrounds and, therefore, different agendas for dealing with kindergarten curriculum.

In each case study themes were selected that helped portray the characteristic emphases in the curriculum construct system held by each teacher. Mrs Daly was characterized as wanting to make her program of activities predictable to the children, yet flexible enough to enable her to respond to child interests. She had two learning priorities, helping children develop their thinking skills and showing them how to get along with one another, which together with her belief that children needed to be active to learn, guided her choice of curriculum activities.

The themes of variety and integration characterized the way Mrs Lewin thought about curriculum. She wanted children to have a wide variety of experiences and she believed they needed help to be able to integrate these so as to achieve a balanced self-concept. She planned very carefully so that the handicapped children in her class became integrated successfully into the group and contributed to group activity.

Mrs Greeman thought of learning priorities as a constellation of overlapping, interconnected concerns which had to be considered when deciding a program. The themes of multiple purposes and multiple outcomes characterized her view of appropriate curriculum. She was concerned with continuity in learning, and with providing a variety of opportunities to learn that would help each child extend his own abilities.

The teachers varied in their emphases and in the meanings they attributed to their activity. There were similarities however, in the ways they organized for learning -- in the choices they made about using time, space, materials, and activities -- that seemed to be related to the existence of a school district kindergarten curriculum guide. The guide helped explain why each teacher followed a similar daily routine, with time for compulsory group activities and for self-selected activity; and why they all organized space in similar ways, allowing for table activity, carpet activity, block play, books and puzzles, and house play. The use of a monthly calendar theme to integrate learning about language, math, and the cultural traditions of the society, was common to the three classrooms.

But these similarities in the ways the teachers planned for learning had different meanings in each teacher's curriculum construct system. This led to an interesting variety in the meanings for actions. Those that came to interest me most during the course of the study were:

1. The reasons given for the complexities that the teachers deliberately built into their curriculum activity.
2. What constituted appropriate teaching activity in each room.
3. The distinction in each classroom between compulsory activity and self-selected activity, and the related meanings assigned to the words 'work' and 'play'.
4. The early childhood education themes that could be identified in each teacher's curriculum construct system, and those that could not.

Planning for Complexity

It seemed that the teachers intentionally made the curriculum complex, so that there were no clearly observable links between specific purposes and specific outcomes. They organized space so that it could be used for different functions, the time was organized to allow for many different types of physical and cognitive activity, desirable materials were those that served many purposes, each child was expected to derive something different from an activity, and most activities planned by the teacher were designed to serve more than one learning priority.

Activities and materials that catered to individual differences, allowing different children to achieve different outcomes were considered to be the most useful. Mrs Daly rejected some of the new curriculum materials being promoted for kindergarten classrooms on the grounds that they did not cater for individual differences.

> .. so I have to sell the fact that that is not the best use of my two and one half hours, to put that work-sheet in front of children of every different ability, from those who can read at about the third grade level to some who do not know their letters. There is no one work-book page that is going to challenge each child enough to be worthwhile.

When these teachers talked about individual differences they were considering more than the individual rates at which children learned new material. Individuality meant that 'each child had a different way to grow'. Each child was expected to have different interests and different styles of learning as well as different capacities for learning. The curriculum activity that each teacher favored, then, was interrelated with the beliefs that they held about children as learners.

Appropriate Teaching Activity

Both Mrs Daly and Mrs Greeman appeared to systematically relate didactic and inductive teaching techniques to the types of learning that they were promoting. They demonstrated or told children about things that children could not be expected to discover, such as the symbols that were used for writing and reading and numeration; the history and myths that were shared by members of their society; the social conventions they were expected to conform to. They used inductive techniques to encourage children to think about such things as mathematical relationships, why there was snow on the ground, or what snow tasted like.

The fact that they made deliberate choices about teaching techniques was evident from their comments during the interviews, yet each of the teachers appeared to find discussion about teaching techniques a sensitive area. Mrs Greeman apologetically explained her inability to avoid some instances of didactic teaching, while Mrs Daly avoided extending discussion of the notion of a distinction in the teaching techniques she favored.

Compulsory Activity and Self-Selected Activity: Work and Play?

Use of the term 'play' was avoided by Mrs Greeman and Mrs Daly, but Mrs Lewin explicitly related compulsory activity with 'work' and self-selected activity with 'play'. Mrs Daly tried to avoid use of either term though she admitted to occasionally referring to

compulsory activity as 'work'. Mrs Greeman chose to call self-selected activity 'Worktime'. It was somewhat disconcerting to find such diverging curricular meanings for the terms 'work' and 'play' within the small number of teachers studied, though interesting to speculate on the reasons for them.

Apple and King (1977) contend that schools function to preserve the social order, and that distinctions such as 'work' and 'play' serve to instill in children the necessary early rules for functioning in a complex and stratified social and economic order. This argument has some attraction when considering the distinctions that Mrs Lewin made between work and play, but it is less applicable to the classroom practices and related meanings of Mrs Daly and Mrs Greeman, unless the argument is put that there are different social groups promoting different social orders. Some schools might see schools as providing competent, docile workers and others, intelligent, independent persons. And there could be any number of other combinations being promoted in a pluralistic society.

It could also be argued that the meanings given to work and play are associated with educational theory. Ronald King (1978) postulated that the use made of the terms 'work' and 'play' by British infants-school teachers were related to the educational ideology they acquired during teacher training. Certainly the emphasis that Mrs Greeman gave to self-selected activity in her curriculum construct system was reminiscent of an early childhood position that 'play is the child's work'.

These are two possible sources for the differences in the meanings the kindergarten teachers gave to 'work' and 'play'. They could be related to teacher education emphases, or to general societal values and purposes. There could be other possible reasons. What the present analysis does indicate, is that the distinction or lack of distinction between 'work' and 'play' in the kindergarten classroom in the United States may be a contentious issue; one that could profit from more detailed study of the ways in which teachers use the terms and why they do so.

Early Childhood Education Themes and Concepts

In a recent analysis of the concepts that continue to predominate in early childhood writings, Spodek (1980) proposed the following:

> Early childhood education is based upon such concepts as 'individuality', 'freedom', 'child interest', 'need', 'play', 'activity', 'creativity', 'child-centered program', and 'growth'. The idea of 'Development as the aim of Education' (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972), a basic progressive education concept, is what connects education with development, and it is with the growth metaphor that the educationist and developmentalist have found a common ground in our field.
>
> (p 8)

He suggested that these were unifying themes for the early childhood field, but that there were likely to be a range of definitions attached to each term, related to the diverse purposes of different groups within early childhood education. In relating the emphases made by the three kindergarten teachers to these enduring themes two things become apparent. Firstly, the kindergarten teachers used those themes that helped them characterize what the learner was like, employing curriculum strategies that were justified in terms of the characterizations. Secondly, they made less use of the themes that could be classified as indicating what a child ought to become.

Of the themes and concepts that Spodek identified, the following appeared in the teacher's curriculum construct systems: 'individuality', 'activity', 'needs', 'interests' and 'growth'. The teachers used these to characterize the child as a learner. Curriculum strategies that incorporated variety, flexibility, continuity, and multi-facetted activities with multiple potential outcomes, were justified in terms of these characteristics of learners. This is an approach to curriculum that could be contrasted with the behavioral objectives approach, which portrays the learner rather differently. In the behavioral objectives approach, it is assumed that 'needs' can be identified in terms of behavioral norms, and the most efficient learning sequences established by the teacher.

A sequenced program of activities can then be established for each child, and behavioral outcomes that indicate progress along that sequence can be specified.

Behavioral objectives, programmed instruction, and work-books, with their linear, sequential, planning strategies, appeared to have a low value for these teachers, who considered that the characteristics of children as learners that needed to be catered for, were their individual learning patterns, their need for active learning, and their individual interests, rather than behavioral norms. Each set of assumptions about what it is important to know about children as learners, influences what is seen to be desirable curriculum practice.

Curriculum practice is also influenced by the learning priorities that teachers hold. None of the three kindergarten teachers mentioned 'freedom', or 'creativity' among the learning priorities they had for their programs, though some of the activities they planned could have been associated with these priorities. Neither did they talk of 'development' as the aim of education. They had more specific ends in mind. They wanted children to have positive attitudes toward themselves and others and toward schooling; to know the social conventions for interacting with others; to acquire cultural knowledge; to acquire a sense of responsibility; and to 'think'.

Only the last of these bears a resemblance to the meanings that are usually associated with 'freedom' or 'creativity', the notion of 'thinking' carrying with it the connotation of constructing one's own reality. This would require a freedom from the need to conform to teacher-imposed meanings, and the creative act of reflecting upon one's experiences, and relating these to what was already known. There was some evidence that the teachers, particularly Mrs Greeman, wanted children to develop this ability. But it was not justified in terms of 'freedom' or 'creativity. I gained the impression, when analyzing the case studies, that 'freedom' and 'creativity', like 'play', were words that the teachers avoided. Why this would be so could only be conjectured. It could mean that the district curriculum guide was more influential than it had seemed to be during the field study. A perusal of the document showed that 'creativity' was mentioned only once, 'freedom' and 'play' not at all. It might mean that the teachers were responding to elementary school values, and that 'freedom', 'creativity', and 'play' were not valued in those circles. They might be reflecting a more general societal set of values as Apple and King (1977) would argue. It might mean that some significant section of the early childhood movement did not accept these values. It could, of course, also mean that the kindergarten teachers personally did not want to encourage children to be creative, independent, playful, human beings, but instead, responsible, conforming and informed citizens.

A further study, that traced the relationships between the early childhood themes adopted in classroom curriculum practice and other contextual variables, would be needed to understand more about why the teachers did not talk about 'freedom' or 'creativity', and were ambivalent about the use of the term 'play'. The purpose of this study was to illuminate what constructs the teachers used, in order to facilitate dialogue about curriculum as it is practiced in schools. The questions that are raised are useful to that dialogue.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated how case study can be used to discover and preserve the unity of meanings that teachers use to explain their classroom activity. Coming to understand that unity and how the parts fitted together required a progressive process of taking in information, processing it, feeding the analysis back to the teacher, reviewing her reactions to it, then starting all over again. The need to obtain the teacher's agreement with the portrayal presented in the case study provided the necessary impetus to focus on the teacher's system of meanings rather than on the researchers.

Because they retain the unity of the teacher's meaning system, the case studies form a valuable data-base from which to analyze aspects of a teacher's curriculum construct system that might be of interest to others. The data on which the analysis is made can always be checked by referring to the written case studies. They provide a data-base that is accessible in ways that quantified data are not.

Case study methods, then, are the appropriate techniques when educational researchers want to understand what happens in classrooms, and want answers to questions about the meanings that school experiences have for the participants.

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